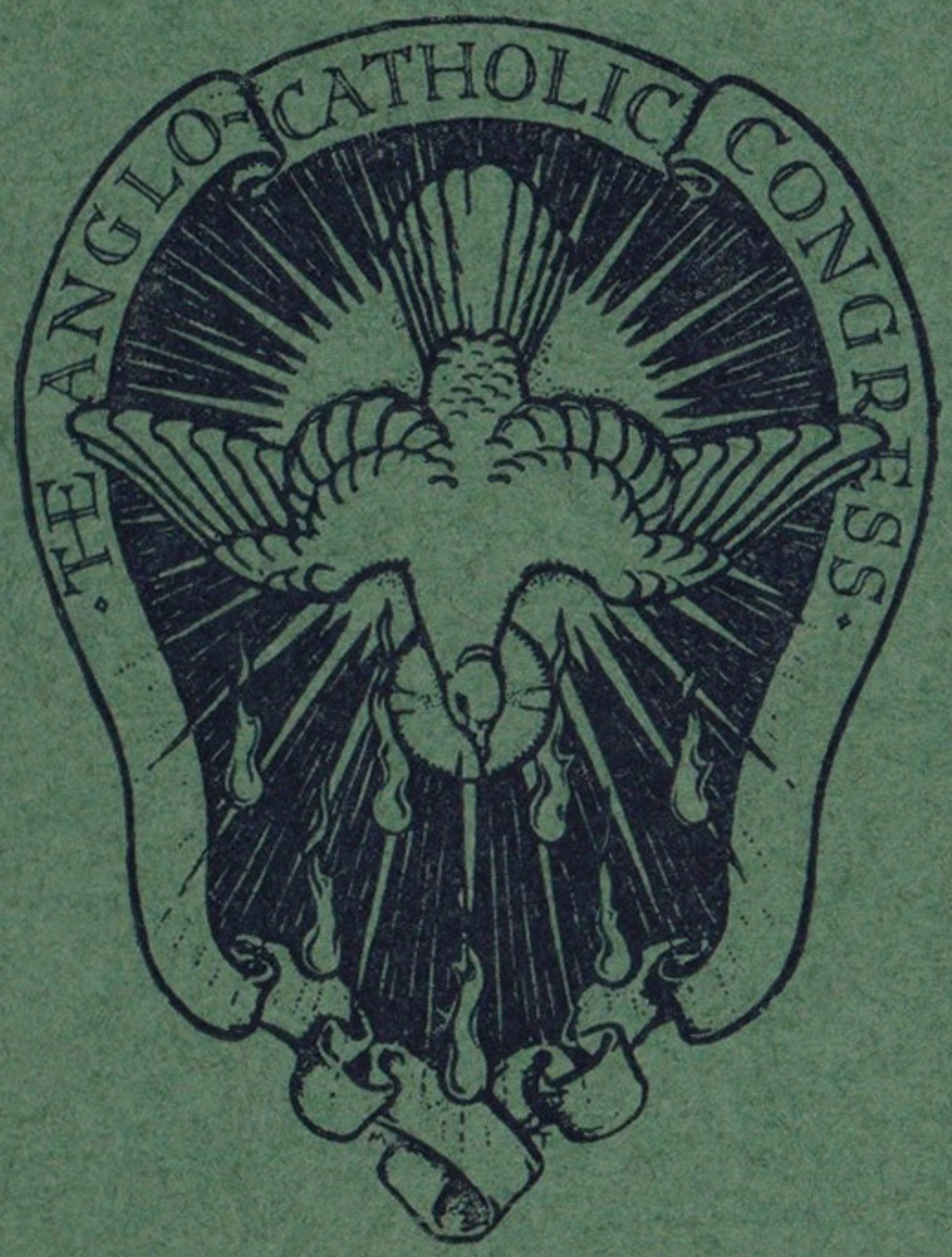
THE CONGRESS BOOKS : No. 38

WHAT IS WRONG WITH MAN?



By J. B. SEATON

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Hon. Canon of Christ Church

THE CONGRESS BOOKS

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LONDON
THE SOCIETY OF
SS. PETER & PAUL
32 George St., Hanover Sq., W. 1, *and*
The Abbey House, Westminster, S.W. 1

AMMIDON & CO.
BALTIMORE

What is Wrong with Man?

THIS is a very living question, in days when, on a large scale, men's best efforts seem to fail, when the best will in the world and the best intelligence appear to be helpless. All over the world mankind is struggling with a task which is plainly too great for human capacity. Never, in the world's history, have so many high aspirations possessed the hearts of men, never have so many noble dreams been dreamed, never have so many excellent schemes been initiated for the welfare of the human race as has been the case since the fighting of the Great War ended. But everything seems to go wrong: our hopeful new beginnings are blighted.

And it is no longer only the theologian, but the practical man of affairs who sees where the root of the trouble lies. It is in the spirit of man himself; it is in the springs of human conduct. The ultimate problem is a spiritual problem. The world cannot be reconstructed until man himself is of a different spirit. And the statesmen turn to the ministers of religion and the trainers of character to help them at

the critical point. But Christendom is disunited and the forces of religion are dissipated, and the ideals of education are confused. Good men are not as good as they might be. For blatant evil is something which any one can judge; its results on human life, any one can see; but 'it is not the wickedness of bad men, but the failings of good men which reveal the dominion of sin.'[1]

That is the phrase which contains the answer to the question 'What is wrong with man?'—the dominion of sin. It is the old Christian interpretation of the facts of human life. We call it the doctrine of original sin. It is difficult to deal with it in isolation from its context in Christian belief. When St. John says, 'We know that the whole world lieth in the evil one,' he at once adds, 'we know that the Son of God is come' (1 *John* v. 19, 20). When St. Paul says, 'As in Adam all die,' he at once adds, 'even so in Christ shall all be made alive' (1 *Cor.* xv. 22). It is impossible for a Christian to think about sin without thinking of God and God's remedy for sin in Christ.

Therefore the writer who is commissioned to write on the subject of original sin must beg his readers to remember that he is only writing about some of the facts, that he is only immediately concerned with that dark background of human life into which Christ

[1] Creighton, *Persecution and Tolerance*, p. 133.

came for its redemption, and that other writers will deal with the work of Christ, 'who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity' (*Titus* ii. 14).

WHAT is original sin ? The phrase may be open to criticism, but in itself it simply means the universally disordered condition of human nature into which the individual is born, and by which his own life is to a greater or less degree determined. Now this is a fact of experience. We have each of us to reckon with a good deal more than sins of our own choice and sins of our own neglect. Our lives are influenced by facts of heredity and by facts of environment, and we are involved in evil systems from which it seems impossible for the individual will to break away.

In these days it is not difficult to realize the situation. During the National Mission of Repentance and Hope, there was brought home to us the distinction between 'individual sin' and 'corporate sin.' Over and above our own personal sins, for which we are directly responsible, there is the corporate sin of the group to which we belong, of the family, the profession, the class, the nation, for which the individual is not directly responsible and

yet to which he contributes and in which he is involved. It is a perfectly valid distinction. These are days of a sharpened group-consciousness. Natural science had previously affirmed the solidarity and interdependence of the human race; psychology has since assured us of the power of the herd instinct and the group mind: nationality has re-expressed itself in the acutest forms: the events of the past years have re-affirmed Dean Church's conclusion, that 'Nations have their fortunes and history independently of the separate individuals composing them, their faults, their virtues, their fate: and so in this broad, loose, and yet not unreal way, they have their character."[1]

The experiences of the war and the subsequent period have shown us to a painful extent the necessary implication of the individual in the fortune and fate of the whole. Every member of a nation has passed under condemnation and been treated as an enemy, because he happened to be born of that nation. Millions of individuals have been obliged to go to kill or be killed by individuals with whom they had no personal quarrel. Multitudes have passed through death by violence or starvation or disease through no fault of their own. Truly it has appeared as though we were involved, by belonging to a class or a group or a nation, or, wider still, as members of the human race,

1 '*Gifts of Civilization*,' p. 246.

in a sinful condition from which there is no escape. We are visited by the consequences of sin which is not our own personal sin.

It should not, therefore, be difficult for any one to-day to understand, even if he cannot explain, what is meant by original sin. It simply means that there is something wrong with man, as such ; a taint, a warp, a twist. In one of his moments of insight, ' Mr. Britling ' is made by Mr. H. G. Wells to exclaim, ' Life had a wrangling birth. On the head of every one of us rests the ancestral curse of fifty million murders. Life struggling under a birth curse. How nearly I come back at times to the Christian theology. And then redemption by the shedding of blood.' It can be seen to be true of every child born into the world, in these grave days, that he is born into a human life which is struggling under a grievous impediment. It is not the whole truth. But so far as it goes, it is the truth.

THE writer of this paper at one time had the opportunity of addressing a Socialist ' church,' and the argument used to conclude, invariably, with the question put to him, ' Do you believe that man is naturally good or that he is naturally bad ? If his con-

ditions of life were rightly adjusted, would he not inevitably go right? Or do you think that, anyhow, there is something naturally wrong with him?' The answer given was that man is by nature both good and evil.

But 'by nature' is an awkward phrase: for it can mean two things which seem to be contradictory. 'Nature' sometimes means 'what ought to be,' and sometimes merely 'what in fact is the case.' Man is by nature a son of God; he has the instinct of sonship, the capacity of response to his heavenly Father; to use the scriptural phrase, he is made in the image of God: and this is shown by the natural virtues which are exhibited at all times and all over the world, quite apart from the Christian profession, as also by his age-long and pathetic search for God.

That is true; but it is also true that there is evil in man's nature as well, and that, even if all his external conditions were such as to offer him the opportunity of a fair development, there remains a condition from which by virtue of his birth into the human race he cannot escape, which tends to distort and arrest his development. That is the Christian contention. It is not based on a mere theory: it is based on a large observation of the facts of life. Robert Browning, with his extraordinary knowledge of the human heart, finds one justification of the Christian faith in its faithfulness to the actual facts of life:

I, still to suppose it (*i.e.* the Christian faith)
true for my part,
See reasons and reasons: this to begin.
'Tis the faith that launched point blank her
dart
At the head of a lie: taught Original Sin,
The Corruption of Man's Heart.[1]

The doctrine of original sin is simply the Christian interpretation of facts. There is no theory about it. It is not a mere deduction from the early chapters of *Genesis*. We derive it from life itself. Those early records of the Fall are the signs of men's own growing consciousness that there was something wrong with human life. And that consciousness was produced by the growing perception of the holiness and righteousness of God, particularly felt and taught by the prophets of Israel.

These undoubtedly developed a sense of sin, and that not merely personal sin, but national sin (in which individuals were implicated, and by reason of which they suffered), and even racial sin. The fifty-first psalm, which we still use as our truest expression of a penitent heart, not only asserts what sin truly is, an offence against God, but also that man is born into a sinful condition of things. 'Behold I was shapen in wickedness, and in sin hath my mother conceived me' (*Psal.* li. 5). When St. Paul looks out round the

[1] *Gold Hair, a story of Pornic.*

contemporary world, at the beginning of his epistle to the Romans, alike among Jew and Gentile he surveys the universal dominion of sin. His judgement has been criticized as unnecessarily harsh: but, if we recognize that he is limiting his view at the moment to one set of facts, it cannot be denied that, so far as it goes, his picture is true. He sees sin simply working itself out, as we see it to-day, with all its horrible consequences.

But the Christian has yet another fact of observation, the transcendent fact of Christ. The experience of Christendom is that Christ deals with man in general, as well as the individual man, that Christ has provided a remedy for a universal disease in the whole human stock. The sinfulness of man in general, as such, is the postulate and background of Christ's redemptive work. The disease in human nature is in part the explanation o his cross and passion.

And this Christian experience fits our modern conception of humanity, which can no longer be regarded as a collection of isolated units, but as bound together into one whole by the interpenetration of a really corporate life. 'It is in virtue of such oneness, such bonds of mutual involution between life and life, that we believe Jesus Christ, a real individual, to be able to exert universal saving power.'[1] Because mankind is one, one in life,

[1] Mackintosh, *Person of Jesus Christ*, p. 389.

and that a tainted life, with a disordered will, therefore it can be dealt with as one by one great redemptive act. The Son of God became man in order to remove man's common burden.

So the belief in original sin is based on a wide induction of facts; the spiritual history of Jew and Gentile, the story of mankind at large, the knowledge of our own hearts—how the thing that we would we cannot, the thing that we would not we do (*Rom.* vii. 15–25)—and the meaning of Christ and his work. The evidence is cumulative and worldwide, taking us back to the roots of history, and with no improvement in regard to the real root of the trouble, even when civilization achieves its greatest triumphs. In our generation, there was an optimistic belief that man had by his wonderful attainments ascended to heights of moral order from which he could not be dislodged. But 'the ape and the tiger'—and let us add, as Dr. Creighton did, 'the donkey'—in man has re-asserted itself. And it is clear to the most casual observer that 'sin is not anything which civilization has a tendency to outgrow.' There is nowhere in the human race any completely and unfailingly righteous life save one, and that the life of him who came to put mankind right.

Some Misconceptions

THE question has been raised whether this wide induction of facts is sufficient to establish the inherent sinfulness of the human race, in itself. The conclusion has been attacked, particularly by Dr. Tennant, who will not allow the existence of sinfulness in the stock of man behind the actual personal sins of individual men. But this would involve a theory of the human soul too individualistic to be true. No man can develop his personality in separation from others. Personality has been defined as the capacity for fellowship, and human personality can only be developed in fellowship, through relationship with others. The life of others is a large element in a man's own life. Indeed pure individualism is unthinkable to us to-day. It must be that the life of every individual is affected for the worse by its necessary connexion with a human life which has some corruption at its roots. That is the truth which lies at the bottom of what is called original or birth sin.

It may be urged that sin is too grave a word to use for a condition into which man is born without any choice of his own; that the word 'sin' is more appropriate, and would be best confined, to thoughts and words and deeds for which we are by our own choice responsible, that is, to 'actual sin.' This is a matter of words and definitions, and it is a difficult thing to change the terms which

are familiar through long use. The term matters less than the reality which the term is intended to express. And the reality of universal evil is here before our very eyes, shrieking aloud at us out of the very heart of this twentieth century in the era of our Lord, and witnessing to the fact that no merely human schemes can avail for a world which needs a radical change that only God's redemption can give. Men still need to be delivered, here and now, out of this evil world.

How it all came about is not the question for this tract to answer. It is the subject of another tract in this series. But it may be helpful to quote some words of Dr. Gore. 'However and wherever and whenever the human consciousness, the consciousness of self, the consciousness of choice, the consciousness of fellowship with the divine, dawned in the animal organism, there, in the dim beginnings, under conditions which I can but dimly realize, it must have been the same thing in principle; sin, retarding, impeding, destroying in the rude beginnings of our race.'[1] And the poison has tainted the whole stock.

A man may complain that it is unfair that he should not have been given a better start, that he should, without his consent or free choice, be involved in the implications and consequences of a state of things for which he was not personally responsible. But evil

[1] *The New Theology and the old Religion*, p. 248.

is not our only human inheritance; it is only part of it. To be a man is to be a man, to share all that is good in human life as well as all that is evil. And truly God condemns no man for that for which he is not personally responsible. It is inconceivable, for instance, for any one who has a Christian view of God to believe that he condemns unbaptized children for that for which they are not responsible. And it is absurd to speak of an individual's implication in the consequences of the world's sinful condition as unjust, in view of God's redemptive action in Christ. We must keep our eyes open to the whole of the truth. The Christian religion tries to face all the facts.

The solidarity of the human race is a fact which no thinker can dispute; it is fact which involves us in evil; but it is also a fact which makes redemption possible. Racial sinfulness is a fact, but the responsibility is not with God. With God is the love which seeks to correct the evil, and in Christ has taken effective action to that end. 'As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive' (1 *Cor.* xv. 22). That is the Christian faith, and it is verified in Christian experience. There is no other interpretation of the facts of this world's story which is of any value.

In these days we can see things in sharp contrast. On the one hand there is any amount of good will, of honest effort, of Chris-

tian spirit, and multitudes of Christian souls know that within themselves the power of Christ has broken the power of evil and rescued them from the disablement of what was wrong with them ; and on the other hand, there is a riot of evil, a curse from which Europe, and not only Europe, is struggling to be free, without avail : Russia and Ireland, Smyrna and the Ruhr, produce their tremendous reaction on all, innocent and guilty alike. The evil of the world is felt as a present and overwhelming reality. A recent writer, Professor Hogg,[1] has reminded us how the lines in Robert Browning's 'Pippa Passes,' put into the mouth of the chief character in the poem,

God's in his heaven :
All's right with the world

—lines so congenial to a previous generation—are really untrue to the facts of life and disregard the essence of the Christian faith. The truer view is, 'God has come to the earth, for there is something far wrong with the world.'

This tract may well conclude with Dr. Gore's summary of the matter. 'For myself I make my profession. I have tried honestly and freely to know myself and to study human life all around me and in the record of history ; and I know no interpretation of human life which

[1] *Redemption from this world*, p. 15.

is adequate both to the rays of glory which I see there and the encompassing gloom, except the estimate of the Bible. Man is made to be a king, but he is "a discrowned king": and no one can put him again on the way of honour except his God who made him and would redeem him."[1]

[1] *Belief in Christ*, p. 267.

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Published by the Society of SS. Peter & Paul, Limited

First Edition: 1923
Making 13,000 *copies*

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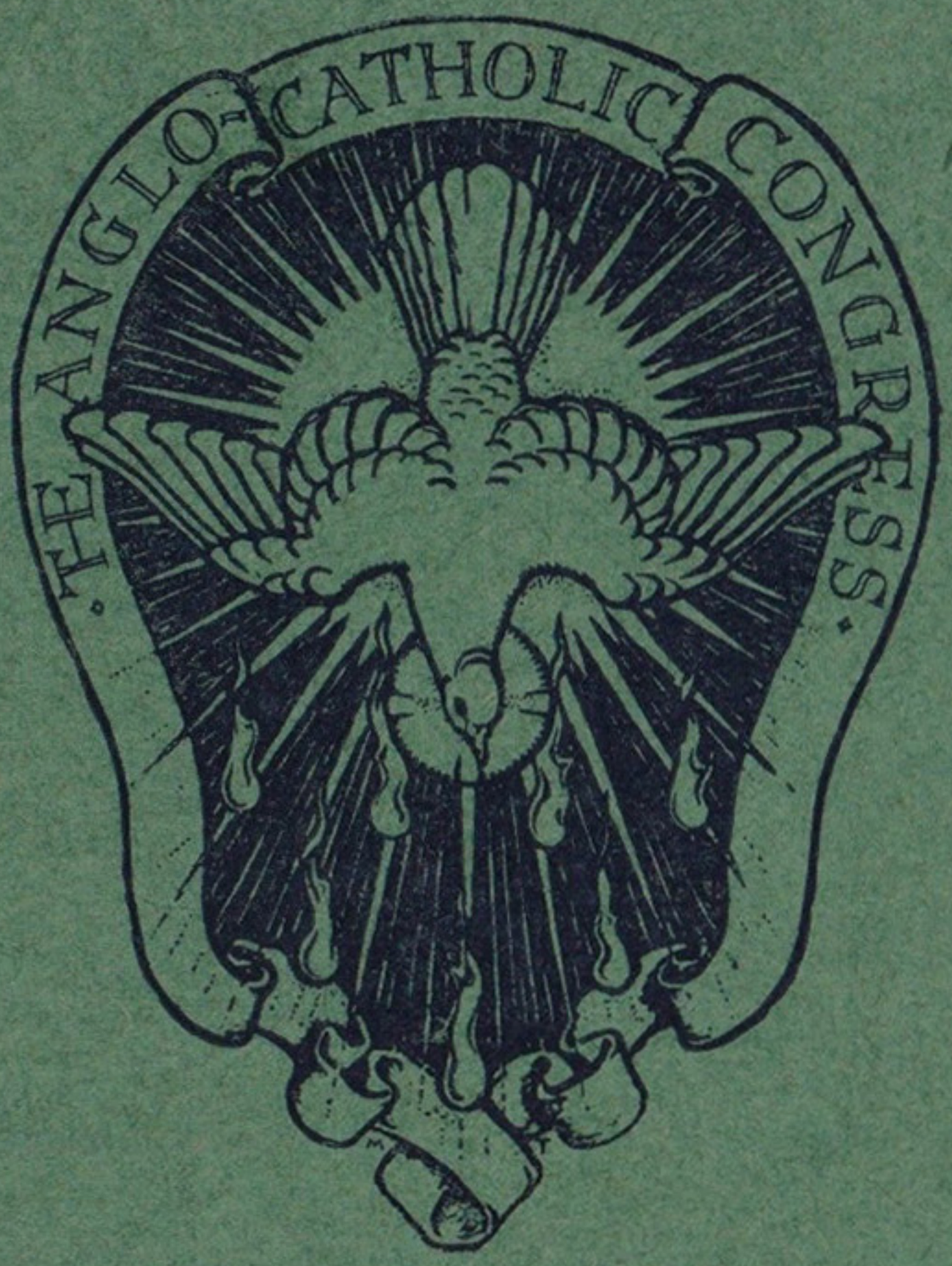

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